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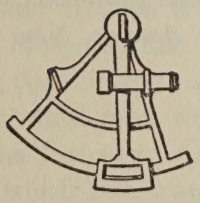
The Calling of the Church—

to *MISSION* and to *UNITY*



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A document commended
by the Central Committee
of the World Council of Churches
for study and comment by the churches
August 1951

The following statement on "The Calling of the Church to Mission and to Unity" was prepared and received by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches at its meeting in August, 1951. In receiving the document, the Central Committee commended it for study and comment in the churches.

It is hoped that individuals and groups within the churches will send their comments to the World Council of Churches, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

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THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH TO MISSION AND TO UNITY

I. The Purpose of this Inquiry

1. The problem of the relation of "church" and "mission" has been before the minds of Christians for many decades. The "older churches" have only slowly and painfully learned to accept the missionary obligation. The "younger churches" are slowly and painfully emerging from the period of tutelage under foreign missions into independence as churches. The words "church" and "mission" still denote in the minds of most Christians two different kinds of institution. Yet we know that these two things cannot rightly be separated.

2. The problem has taken a new shape through the development of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches as two distinct organizations. These two organizations represent somewhat different constituencies and gather to themselves different enthusiasms. The time has come when the relation between them must be most carefully reconsidered.

3. It must at once be said that it is impossible to say simply that the I.M.C. represents the calling of the Church to evangelism, and the W.C.C. its calling to unity. The situation is much more complex. On the one hand the missionary movement has been from the beginning imbued with a deep sense of the calling to unity. Because the Gospel is one and the world is one, those who were inspired to recall the Church to its duty to take the Gospel to the whole world could not fail to see a vision of unity which transcended those divisions within which churches unmindful of their missionary calling had been so long content to live. The young churches which have grown up as the fruit of this missionary movement have already in many areas formed regional unions of churches, and the fact that the Church is now—for the first time—world-wide, has inevitably compelled Christians to think afresh about its unity. On the other hand, the movement towards unity has from the beginning concerned itself with the Church's witness to the world. Unity has been sought out of a deep conviction that only together can Christians give true witness and effective service to the world. By far the greater part of the total activity of the World Council of Churches is concerned with such witness and service to the world.

4. The present situation is, however, one of real confusion. It is true that in some churches efforts have been made to present the mis-

sionary obligation and the obligation to unity in their true inter-dependence, while in other churches there is so little concern about either obligation that the problem does not arise. But the following examples may be given of the failure to relate the two obligations rightly to each other:

(a) Among students and others in the "older churches" there is a widespread belief that the "missionary" era has been succeeded by the "ecumenical" and that, as a consequence, the world-wide missionary obligation has lost something of its urgency.

(b) In the lands of the "younger churches" the word "mission" has been almost exclusively connected with organizations controlled from the lands of the western nations. With the coming of a new era in which the "younger churches" have taken their place as equal partners with the "older churches" in the ecumenical movement, there is a danger that the whole concept of "mission" should be at a discount as belonging to a bygone day.

(c) There is a danger that the World Council of Churches, being in a position to leave "missionary" concerns to another body, should become an affair for ecclesiastics concerned simply with the Church itself, and should lose that character of openness and commitment to the world's needs which has characterized the "missionary" movement.

(d) It is a very serious fact that, on the above grounds, the World Council of Churches is rejected by considerable bodies of Christians who—in the name of missionary concern—refuse to be bound up with a Council of Churches. These groups have increased greatly in recent years. Some of them are working deliberately against the Council, and are causing much confusion in some areas.

II. Terminology

1. It is necessary to point out that thinking on these issues is often confused by lack of clarity in the use of terms. It is extremely difficult to achieve uniformity because, quite apart from problems of translation, even the same English word carries very different overtones of meaning in different areas. The words "mission" and "community" are examples which have occurred during our discussion. We would especially draw attention to the recent confusion in the use of the word "ecumenical." It is important to insist that this word, which comes from

the Greek word for "the whole inhabited earth," is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole Church to bring the Gospel to the whole world. It therefore covers equally the missionary movement and the movement towards unity, and must not be used to describe the latter in contradistinction to the former. We believe that a real service will be rendered to true thinking on these subjects in the churches if we so use this word that it covers both "unity" and "mission" in the context of the whole world. Both the I.M.C. and the W.C.C. are thus properly to be described as organs of the ecumenical movement.

2. Our concern in this study is the recovery in thought, in action, and in organization, of the true unity between the Church's mission to the world (its apostolate) and the Church's obligation to be one.

III. The Biblical Basis for the Church's Unity and Apostolicity

1. The division in our thought and practice between "church" and "mission" can be overcome only as we return to Christ Himself, in Whom the Church has its being and its task, and to a fresh understanding of what He has done, is doing, and will do. God's eternal purpose is to "sum up all things in Christ." According to this purpose He has reconciled us to Himself and to one another through the Cross and has built us together to be a habitation of God in the Spirit. In reconciling us to Himself in Christ He has at the same time made us His ambassadors beseeching others to be reconciled to Him. He has made us members in the Body of Christ, and that means that we are both members one of another and also committed thereby to partnership in His redeeming mission.

2. In more detail we may say that the Church's unity and apostolicity rests upon the whole redeeming work of Christ—past, present and future.

(a) It rests upon His finished work upon the Cross. He has wrought the atonement between man and God—an atonement for the whole human race. As we receive the reconciliation we are both reconciled to one another, and also constrained by His love to bring to all men the good news of reconciliation.

(b) It rests upon His continuing work as the risen Lord Who, having conquered sin and death, sits at God's right hand, and by His spirit communicates to us His own fullness. By His spirit we are joined as members in His body, committed to His redemp-

tive mission. We are enabled to abide in Him, and so to bear fruit. We are given power to be His witnesses to all the nations and to gather together peoples of all races and tongues.

(c) It rests upon His promise that He will come again. In His final victory the kingdoms of the world will be His, there will be one flock as there is one Shepherd, and all things will be summed up in Him. But first the Gospel of the Kingdom is to be preached throughout the whole world. In His mercy He gives us time and strength to fulfill this task.

3. Thus the obligation to take the Gospel to the whole world, and the obligation to draw all Christ's people together both rest upon Christ's whole work, and are indissolubly connected. Every attempt to separate these two tasks violates the wholeness of Christ's ministry to the world. Both of them are, in the strict sense of the word, essential to the being of the Church and the fulfillment of its function as the Body of Christ.

(NOTE): There are two important matters in which we are not agreed as to the interpretation of the biblical revelation, and on these we consider that study is needed:

(a) While we are agreed that unity is of the essence of the Church, we are not agreed as to the visible forms in which this unity is to be expressed.

(b) While we are agreed in looking for Christ's final victory, we are not agreed as to the manner of His victory, and as to its relation to what we may rightly hope for within history.

IV. Implications for the Life of the Church

1. We recognize with thankfulness all the signs of the Church's acknowledgement of its missionary nature—the witness of many congregations and groups, the great work of "home" and "foreign" missions, and the faithful witness of countless individuals.

2. Yet we have to confess with deep penitence that the normal life of our churches does *not* express the truth that to be a Christian is necessarily to be involved in a mission to the whole world.

(a) The average congregation is apt to be an introverted community which does not think primarily of its obligation to bring the knowledge of Christ to its whole neighborhood and to the whole world, and this introversion is apt to mark the life, thought and leadership of the whole Church. This applies to the "younger churches" as well as the "older."

(b) Even where the obligation is acknowledged and acted upon, such action tends to take the form of a separate "mission" supported by the congregation but not regarded as the responsibility of every member.

(c) Normal theological study and teaching does not sufficiently concern itself with the task of taking the Gospel to those outside. It largely presupposes a static, rather than a missionary Church.

(d) The great world missionary enterprise of the churches has naturally created its own instruments and organizations, and these tend to be somewhat separate from the rest of the life of the churches. It is too easy to be a church member without feeling oneself committed to the world-wide missionary task.

3. We are thankful to know of many bold attempts to break through this situation and to develop new patterns of church life which shall demonstrate the essentially dynamic and missionary character of the Church. We commend to the attention of the I.M.C. and the W.C.C. the studies carried on in this realm by the W.C.C. through its Secretariat for Evangelism, and we hope that it will be possible to enlist the much more energetic participation of the churches in these studies.

4. As we see how many churches in our own day are being stripped of many things which have been regarded as necessary—such as buildings, funds, institutions, and privileged positions—we are led to believe that God is in this way forcing His Church to come out into the open and to commit itself afresh in a dynamic encounter with the world. We pray that the Church everywhere may learn to abandon all trust in earthly securities and to face the world with that courage which is now the very condition of existence for some of our member churches.

V. Implications for the World Missionary Task

1. The great missionary movement of the recent centuries has under God brought into being a Church which is in some sense world-wide. We confess with gratitude that this is a mighty work of God's Spirit working through His Church even when the Church's obedience was in many ways deeply imperfect. Despite all its limitations and imperfections this movement has been the greatest spiritual movement of its kind in history. It is a movement moreover which, even at the present time, engages the devotion and represents the sacrificial giving of a great multitude of Christian people.

2. We have nevertheless to acknowledge with penitence that this

great movement has in many respects been marred by the defects of the churches from which the mission went forth. In particular:

(a) There has been an unconscious confusion of the unchanging Gospel with the particular cultural, economic and institutional forms of the "older churches."

(b) The result has been that missionaries of the "older churches" have often been instrumental in bringing into being churches which are too largely replicas of those from which they had come. We have therefore to admit that there has been an element of cultural domination in the work of missions, and that those engaged in the missionary enterprise have often relied too much upon their own precept, example and influence and have not given sufficient freedom to the "younger churches" to express their Christian obedience in new forms under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

(c) This has inevitably resulted in the creation of churches which, even though technically independent, are yet compelled to depend upon the "older churches" for support in leadership and finance because they are too foreign in form.

(d) Moreover, because of the divisions in the "older churches," the various missions of many denominations from many lands have created confusion and division of the Christian witness among non-Christian peoples.

(e) We have to admit that too large a proportion of the great volume of missionary giving and service which flows out from the "older churches" is at present required to prop up relatively static "younger churches," rather than to make new advances for the Gospel.

3. We are therefore led to urge that the time is ripe for a fresh study of missionary principles and practice, and especially for a very earnest reconsideration of our present methods in the light of the Bible. We trust that the present study program of the I.M.C. will be helpful to this end. Our aim must be a partnership between "older" and "younger" churches in which the strength of the former is not exhausted in the support of the latter, but in which "older" and "younger" churches together can devote their combined strength to the vast unfinished mission of the Church to all men and all nations.

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